

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 5: The Early Daoists – Hermits, Shen Dao, and Laozi

Section 8: Reversal: A way to dào?

- 道可道非常道 Dàoos can be dào-ed; they're not constant dàoos (*Dao De Jing, Chapter 1*)
 - Again using 道dào^{path} as a verb
 - I can recommend that you follow a path - it's not a constant 道dào^{path}
 - You have a choice to follow it or not
 - Following Shen Dao's 道dào^{path} is not a choice; you can't fail to follow it
 - Shen Dao's 道dào^{path} is, thus, not a 道dào^{path} because it *is* constant (you cannot fail to follow it)
 - Any 道dào^{path} that gives you guidance is not constant –one you can choose
- A 道dào^{path} that can guide you is not constant because it can be named
- 名可名非常名 Names can be named; they're not constant names (*Dao De Jing, Chapter 1*)
- Traditional interpretation of the opening of *Dao De Jing*: *You cannot speak the 道dào^{path}, you cannot put it into words*
 - So why did Laozi write it?
 - Traditional answer: he was forced to write it by a border guard when crossing into India to teach Buddhism
- The focus of the rest of the *Dao De Jing* is on what the *Laozi* calls 'reversing opposites'
 - Every term comes with a desire for one of the two opposites
 - Laozi takes concepts already in place in the Confucian & Mohist social dàoos and flips the polarity - make the one you should desire the one to avoid
 - Illustrates the *inconstancy* of dàoos—that we can choose them (or not)

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- The *DaoDe Jing* includes many examples of which choosing the 'lower' of two options is the best choice
 - Uses many dualistic symbol archetypes: sun/moon, day/night, yin/yang, having/lacking, male/female, upper/lower, superior/inferior, dry/moist
 - Laozi illustrates the value of the conventionally lower/inferior option
 - The *Laozi* values the negative values, e.g., of 無 *wu*^{lacking}, submission, and passivity
 - The metaphor of the valley of the female, the source of creation, of life - Daoist feminist balance
- Is this 'negative' *dào* Laozi's constant *dào*? Conflicts with his own theory.
 - It's more plausibly a lesson in how *dào*s can change and how alternative 'feminine' styles can be good guidance.
- What is Laozi's constant *dào*?
 - Mystical? So, not in language? Then Laozi can't tell us
 - Skeptical? So, it can't be known? Then Laozi can't tell us
 - Relative? So, it depends on each person? Then Laozi can't tell us
- So, Laozi presents no constant *dào*